

*Ribes aureum*

Golden Currant

by Kathy Lloyd, Montana Native Plant Society

Meriwether Lewis was apparently intrigued by the different species and varieties of currants he saw on his westward journey. He wrote detailed descriptions and mentioned currants often in his journal. William Clark also mentioned species of currants in his journal. Lewis first collected golden currant on July 29, 1805 in the vicinity of Three Forks in Gallatin County. It is the only specimen from 1805 collected in Montana that exists today. All of the other specimens that Lewis collected, first those between Fort Mandan and White Bear Island near present-day Great Falls, and then those collected between the Great Falls of the Missouri and Camp Fortunate, were destroyed. They had been placed in caches and the moisture caused the plant specimens to mold beyond recognition. In the case of the cache near present-day Great Falls, the Missouri River rose so high it inundated the cache. Lewis must have been very disappointed, to say the least, to find that months of painstaking plant collecting and labeling had been destroyed. He took the loss stoically, however, saying in his journal on July 13, 1806 only, "all my specimens of plants also lost." Even worse, it is likely he didn't know of the loss of the specimens in the Camp Fortunate cache until he met up with Clark in North Dakota on August 12, 1806. John Ordway, who met Lewis at the confluence of the Marias and Missouri Rivers on July 13, 1806, and was present when the Camp Fortunate cache was unburied on July 9, says in his journal, "joined the party who arived here last evening and opened our carsh found every thing in it Safe." Ordway may not have known all but one plant specimen was destroyed, or didn't realize the importance of collecting plant specimens. Had Lewis known of the loss, he undoubtedly would have tried to replace some of the specimens.

Today, there are two sheets containing five specimens of golden currant, or *Ribes aureum* as it is known in botanical circles. One sheet, containing two specimens, is in the Lewis & Clark Herbarium in Philadelphia and the other, with three specimens, is at the Herbarium, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, England. Over the years, Lewis and Clark botanical scholars have had different interpretations about collection locations and the taxonomic classification of the five specimens. Some now conclude that some of the specimens may have been grown from seed collected in 1811 by Thomas Nuttall. It is generally accepted however, that one of the specimens on the sheet in the Lewis & Clark Herbarium is the original material preserved by Lewis on July 29, 1805 in Montana. The original annotation by Frederick Pursh says of this specimen, "Yellow Currant of the Missouri. Jul. 29th 1805." Pursh's book, *Flora Americae Septentrionalis*, published in 1814, includes a beautiful hand-colored plate of golden currant, done by the author.

Golden currant extends from British Columbia and Quebec in Canada to Texas and New Mexico. The species is also found west to Los Angeles, California, and along the eastern slopes of the Cascade Range. It extends east to South Dakota and is considered rare in Saskatchewan. As demonstrated by Lewis and Clark, golden currant had food and horticultural possibilities and it has been cultivated and naturalized in the eastern United States as well.

Golden currant, a member of the currant family, Grossulariaceae, is an attractive shrub from three to 10 feet tall. The leaves are alternate on the branches and have three, sometimes toothed, lobes. Unlike some other species of currants or gooseberries, golden currant has no thorns and the branches are smooth. The spicily-scented flowers are yellow and tubular in shape, and form racemes in the axils of the leaves. The edible fruit can be yellow, black or reddish in color. Look for golden currant in the moist soils of woodlands, grasslands, coniferous forests and riparian shrub communities. Golden currant flowers from early spring to June and the fruit ripens in August and September. On July 12, 1806 Lewis wrote, "the yellow Currants begining to ripen."

Sacagawea pointed out golden currant to Lewis and his journal entry for April 30, 1805 says she, "found & brought me a bush Something like the Current, which She Said bore a delicious froot and that great quantities grew on the Rocky Mountains, this Shrub was in bloom has a yellow flower with a deep Cup, the froot when ripe is yellow and hangs in bunches like Cheries, Some of those berries yet remained on the bushes." Indian tribes used golden currant fruit fresh and dried, and mixed it with other berries, fat and meat to make pemmican. Some tribes dried and ground the berries and mixed them with flour made from seeds to make a mush. Today, the berries are still used to make jams and jellies and pies. Other American Indian cultures used the inner bark of golden currant as a poultice or decoction for skin sores and swellings and the stems were used to make arrows.

The fruit of various currant species is also a valuable food for songbirds, chipmunks, ground squirrels, black bears and other animals. Deer and elk may browse the twigs and leaves and the shrubs provide cover for animals.

Golden currant is cultivated as an ornamental and has been used in landscape plantings and gardens since Lewis and Clark described the species in the early 1800s. It is an attractive addition to a native landscape and has been used to revegetate disturbed areas. It spreads both by rhizomes and by seed and will sprout after cutting or fire, making it an easy plant to maintain. It is also somewhat shade tolerant and seeds may remain viable for many years.

Golden currant has been identified as an alternate host for white pine blister rust that attacks five-needled pines. Because of this, various native *Ribes* species have been the unfortunate targets of several eradication efforts over the years.

Golden currant is a special plant in Montana, both because of its historical and cultural significance and because it is a valuable addition to our native flora in its own right. Next time you see this stately shrub remember that it was the only plant specimen collected in Montana to survive from 1805.